UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Maurice Strong**
Special Adviser to the Secretary-General

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, International Documents Review
Afsane Bassir Pour, Le Monde

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

UNITED NATIONS REFORM

Last year, United Nations General Assembly approved the Secretary-General's reform package entitled "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform". Maurice Strong, Executive Coordinator of the Reform Team appointed by the Secretary-General to put this package together, elaborates on the reform process and its impact on the work of the world organization.

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Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Corazon A. Icasas

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

A year ago, United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, presented a comprehensive reform package to streamline and reinvigorate the world organization. The fifty-second session of the General Assembly recently approved the package. What are these reforms and, if implemented, what is their impact on the performance and the future of the global organization?

Our guest today, Maurice Strong, was the Executive Coordinator of the Reform Team appointed by the Secretary-General to put together a reform package. Currently, Mr. Strong is a Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Strong are Bhaskar Menon of the International Documents Review and Afsane Bassir Pour of Le Monde. Mr. Strong welcome to World Chronicle.

STRONG: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Special Adviser now, formerly Executive Coordinator, when the reform package was unveiled in July of '97, it was met by a somewhat underwhelming reaction by important people in the Congress of the United States whom it was intended to impress. Has there been any change of attitude on Washington's part in the intervening period?

STRONG: First of all, let me say the Reform Package was not just designed to impress or respond to the concerns of the US Congress. Of course, that is a very important concern ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, partly to impress ...

STRONG: Well, yeah, it wasn't done for the – the Secretary-General took a very conscious decision to develop a Reform Package that would actually serve the interest of the whole United Nations membership and constituency and, at the same time, meet the concerns of that very important member – the United States and its Congress – but not slavishly to respond to the specific benchmarks that were being imposed by the Congress and we didn't. But the package did, in fact, satisfy most of the constituency in the sense – including the US Congress – in the sense that they were willing and are willing now to appropriate the funds. The fact that they have not done so, is not related to their response to reform programme. Even Senator Helms has, himself, said now that he is willing to support the contribution of the funds that the US is obligated to pay and others – other key Republicans. So, I would say, you're not hearing any more from those sources severe criticisms of the UN's unwillingness to reform itself. We may not have met all their

requirements but in my view, overall, the Secretary-General's package went even farther in many respects than they were proposing.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that's not what they were saying. They say, at the time that it was unveiled, that it didn't go far enough – it was not sweeping enough. But I think that you've went – felt that you could have gone just about as far as you could go.

STRONG: I think the proof of that is the fact that we had real difficulty getting approval of the General Assembly – we got it at the very last minute after some very, very tough negotiations, and I think that demonstrates that the Secretary-General's intention of pushing the reform effort as far as political realities would permit actually did work. I don't think we could have pushed it any farther ...

MENON: You – perhaps tell us what were the main elements of reform?

STRONG: Well, the main elements of – there are really two or let us say, three, basic components of the reform programme. First, were those things that were within the Secretary-General's own powers as the Chief Executive Officer of ..

LITTLEJOHNS: Administrative signature ..

STRONG: That's right. And there he didn't wait for approval. He went right ahead and a good many of those things have already been implemented. Others are in the process of being implemented. Now, there were a number of others which were, to quite a degree within his authority, but required some form of approval from the General Assembly – budgetary approval, in particular. Well, he got that. By and large, he got the kind of approvals he sought. The third were those more fundamental changes that really the Secretary-General cannot do – that only governments can do. Changes even in the charter. Changes in the agenda of the Organization. Changes in the structure of the organizations of the UN. Those he put on the table and he gave him – he gave governments some very strong recommendations. But, those things are going to take some time.

MENON: That's a procedural answer that the three types of actions which were recommended. Substantively, what were the elements of change – when you look at the UN before the reform process started and say, ten years down the line, how will the UN be any different?

STRONG: Well, first of all, it is already different. In the first part of the reform process, that which was largely under his own control, the Secretary-General took thirty different departments, organizations and funds and put them within five decision-making groups. Very much easier do in the private sector. Of course, the UN is not a private corporation, but he invoked some of the management principles of the private sectors. And these were not just coordinating groups. They were executive decision making groups. Now, there were some people who joined those kicking and screaming. But they are now

functioning really quite well. And, I mean, an important one being, of course, United Nations Development Group, which was quite controversial. Now I think you'll find that they are functioning really quite well. And that means that when the UN is dealing with an important development issue, all the parts of the Organization that have some responsibilities, are now working together –are consulting with each other, are not duplicating each other. Also in the whole area of administrative services. Moving to common services where, instead of each organization duplicating these services, we pool them and work together. So that was a very important tangible result. Another tangible result was, of course, the reductions in administrative expenses – a thirty percent reduction. Now, not all of that have been achieved but there's been good progress towards achieving that. And that's not ...

LITTLEJOHNS: And what about cutting staff. You – there was a cut of what – a thousand people?

STRONG: There was a cut of a thousand people. Now some of those represented posts that have not been filled but they were in the process of being filled. So, he cut those out and they will represent a permanent saving of staff and funding. Now also, very importantly, is the creation of UN – of a consolidated field presence ..

LITTLEJOHNS: What does that mean?

STRONG: That means that the various organizations of the UN will function as a coherent whole in the field. And that's actually where the development action is – in the field. They were grouped together in what we call a UN house. Now, that will take some time. It happened in some places and will be happening on a continuing basis ..

LITTLEJOHNS: These are the people who are providing technical assistance – that kind of thing?

STRONG: That's right. Actually running the programmes in the field which are designed to support the governments. And support to development process at the field level. Those were also fragmented so, at the – creating a coherent structure at the Headquarters level was just one step. We had to actually create a counterpart of that at the field level. And that really permits the organization to function so that the Headquarters is actually feeding into and supporting the field level. Now that, again, we've made great progress in implementing that, but implementation takes time and it's still going on.

BASSIR POUR: I'd like to go back to Michael's first question when he spoke of underwhelmed. I know that, as a journalist, I have great trouble selling the reform idea to my editors. And it is also so for the general public. There's no enthusiasm. You call the Reform Programme renewing the United Nations. But I sense absolutely no enthusiasm.

Indeed people are underwhelmed. Why is this? Is it because we don't understand what exactly, how the UN will look like after the reform?

STRONG: Management changes and administrative changes and personnel and structural changes are not the stuff that people arise to with enthusiasm. When you have a crisis, when you have a problem because of bad management, because of bad merger organization, of course that makes news, but when you fix it up, it's like going to the hospital if you're dying or if you get run over by a car, it's news. But if you go to your doctor, and he fixes you up that's not really very much news and that's the same thing with the UN.

BASSIR POUR: Shouldn't part of the UN reform also be selling the image of the UN so that there is indeed enthusiasm amongst the peoples for the United Nations – is that part of your reform?

STRONG: Yes, and one part of it is a complete overhaul of whole public information structure. That is something we have mandated. It has not yet taken place because there needs to be some changes in leadership which are under way there but have not yet actually taken hold. So that is, you're right. Now, but remember that the reform process was not designed to be a just a show thing. It was designed to really change the UN. Now that is not something that is likely to grab people's imagination. But look at the other side of it. Look at the way the UN was being condemned because it was not reforming. Look at what the people in the US Congress were saying about the UN. They were getting – making dramatic statements but they were negative statements about the UN. Have you heard any of those lately.

BASSIR POUR: Well, I have not heard many positive statements either, as Michael pointed out at the beginning.

STRONG: Well, you know, that, frankly, does not concern me particularly. Because you know, this is not the kind of stuff that makes headlines but it's a kind of stuff that helps to prevent the crisis type of headline. You know, the very fact most of the publicity UN was getting before the reforms was very negative publicity and avoiding the negatives is also an important way of improving the image of the UN.

LITTLEJOHNS: As you mentioned, the United States has not paid its arrears.

STRONG: No, but there's a fundamental important point and that is – it is not because they have decided the reform effort was no good. They have decided that the reform effort, on the whole, has met their objectives. But they have a very, very difficult domestic issue that has the issue of abortion and one particular member representing the Christian right, and nobody wants to take on the Christian right wing. I shouldn't be – perhaps I am not an expert on US politics – but for a very domestic reason, it has not

happened. But the leadership of the Congress has permitted themselves have said that they do intend to do this. So in that sense, we have met the test.

MENON: Can I ask you – there are two elements of reform which are really fascinating and which really have not caught much exposure. One is the opening up to corporation – the private sector, and the other is the involvement of the Non-Governmental Organizations in the UN. Could you speak about this and explain why this is necessary?

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, the United Nations is the principal world organization through which governments help to run the world. I mean, it's not a government, but it's an instrument through which governments try to deal with issues that none of them can deal with alone. And these days, governments cannot be alone in dealing with these issues. Private corporations are important actors in the world economy and civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations are important actors. So you cannot really deal with these issues if you ignore some of the important actors. Now, the UN is an organization of governments and, therefore, its primary constituency is governments. But it also needs to be realistic in reaching out to the other sectors of society.

MENON: How will it reach out?

STRONG: Well, for example, the World Economic Forum recently created a Business Advisory Group that makes itself available to the UN and to other international organizations as a means of consulting. Now that group consists of the major business organizations, not corporations themselves, but the International Chamber of Commerce, the Indian Confederation of Industry – a whole series of business organizations through which international organizations, particularly the UN, can consult on issues of common concern and it's important – it's not a decision-making body – the corporations and business does not make the decisions in the UN, but their inputs, their views, their perspectives, are extremely valuable in doing the work of the United Nations so that instrument has actually been created. The International Chamber of Commerce recently had a session here at the UN Headquarters with some business leaders. These are interactive, informational exchanges, they are not decision making bodies. The same with civil society. The interaction with civil society has been expanding greatly and we have called – the Secretary-General – has called for much greater participation by civil society.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle. Our guest is Maurice Strong, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.**

BASSIR POUR: Do you get the sense that major corporations, big companies, are interested in cooperating with the UN? Because UN could put some – try to put some – regulations, regulate their activities – isn't there a problem with that? How do you see the corporations' reaction?

STRONG: Yeah, you know, cooperation is one thing, interaction and consultation is another. Interaction and consultation can sometimes lead to cooperation but it does not always have to. Because corporations realize that the UN, although it's not a power into itself, it is a forum in which governments will take important decisions that might affect corporations. And therefore, the corporations take seriously the possibility of, you know, having an input through the UN. Of course, they have their inputs through their own national governments as well. So, corporations are increasingly taking the UN seriously, but not necessarily in a sense of actually cooperating with them on programmes – some of that – but that's not the primary thing. The primary thing is cooperating in exchanging information, viewpoints, perspectives, the kind of thing that improves the understanding between them, and hopefully will improve the ability of the UN to act as an international forum for the decisions of its conference.

BASSIR POUR: What about the possibility of financial contributions from the corporations. Is that something ...

LITTLEJOHNS: It's not possible, is it?

BASSIR POUR: ... is that possible?

STRONG: No. The corporations did not contribute to the UN budget.

BASSIR POUR: They cannot do that, can they?

STRONG: No, I mean, but there are many ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Unless Ted Turner ...

STRONG: Well, he has a special way. No, w he hasn't – and others can do the same thing. After all, one of the principal things we've been hearing about the – at the UN for some years now including some of this – the need for new and additional resources. The Secretary-General has been told, time and time again by his governments, to go out there and see if he can mobilize some of these resources. Well, he has done so. He got a billion dollars from Turner but not for the UN, not to just put in the administration of the UN but to put in specific programmes and projects that further the aims and objectives ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Mostly in Third World Countries ....

STRONG: Yes. Almost entirely in Third World Countries.

MENON: The element of reform consists of the – of closer coordination and work of the UN system itself. And this area, the work of the UN with the World Bank and its national monetary fund has entered a new phase.

STRONG: Yes.

MENON: How so?

STRONG: Well, first of all. One of the very interesting things that happened – has happened – is you know, for years, specialized agencies have been, you know, very, very

cautious in relating to the central body of the UN. In theory, of course, the central body of the UN, headed by the Secretary-General is the centrepiece of the system. But the specialized agencies have their own governing bodies, their own direct access to governments and, therefore, have a very high degree of autonomy. Now, more and more, though, those organizations are realizing that the issues that they relate – that they deal with, that they're mandated to deal with cannot be dealt with an isolation. That we're dealing with a whole system of relationships and that there has to be more cooperation and also that the public does not recognize all these narrow divisions between the agencies. It looks at them as a whole and if one agency goes bad or gets into trouble, it affects the image and the support for the whole. So this was particularly evident at the very first meeting held in living memory – informal, open session of the – served by the Secretary-General with all heads of the agencies. And there was a remarkable degree for an old veteran like me to see these people really saying to the Secretary-General, 'look, we – you need to take the lead, we need to cooperate very much more than we have in the past'. So I see a real movement towards cooperation. Now, how far that will go, and how much people will be able to give up some of their autonomy in order to be able to cooperate on some of these larger issues, remains to be seen.

MENON: One particular element, I think, also needs a bit of light shed on it, which is, to what extent is the reform agenda guided by governments? To what extent has US executive coordinated? Did you go to the governments and say, 'what do you think?' or did you say to them 'this is what we think should be done'. What was the interplay like?

STRONG: Well, first of all, the Secretary-General's reform process did not start from zero. Reform has been a constant issue in the UN for years, and every Secretary-General has done something, I mean, towards reform. None on the scale that Secretary-General Kofi Annan has done, but there have been many governmental bodies, there've been many expert bodies, there're volumes of reports and recommendations. So we did not start from zero. And many of those came from governments. So we didn't start saying, 'this is our plan and what do you think of it?'. We went back to what they have said. What these independent groups have said, what the governments have said, and there were volumes of recommendations. The problem is, they have never really been brought together in a framework in which you can actually act on them. So, that's what the Secretary-General did. He took this and he, with our help, he crystallized out of all of these opinions that had been expressed before, he crystallized a concrete programme. And it was largely, you know his version of what they have been saying about reform. So it was not absolutely unique. What was unique about it is that he took all these things and put them into a concrete programme that they could react to it.

MENON: If you put the process on a scale of 1 to 10, where would you say we've reached now?

LITTLEJOHNS: What do you mean, in terms of implementation?

BASSIR POUR: Time frame?

MENON: In terms of implementation of reform. If you look at it as a 1 to 10 scale.

STRONG: Well, if you say 1 to 10 – if you use a scale in terms of 1 to 10 in terms of what you actually expect to have happened within this time frame, I would say, maybe an 8. If you look at that ...

MENON: As high as that?

STRONG: Yes. But if you look 1 to 10 in terms of what has to happen, your retirement will be more like 5 or 6, because, you know, if – obviously your reform is going to have to be, as the Secretary-General has pointed out time and time again, a continuing process not a single event and, therefore, it's gonna take time and there's still lots of resistance in the system. You know, people do resist change and there's lots of ....

MENON: Is this individual resistance or organizational resistance? What kind of ....

STRONG: A little bit of both. Now, having said that, this is not a general criticism – it's an observation. People, on the whole, have been supportive and New York staff, one of the things that encouraged me is basically the people do so much of the work in the Organization. They're very active in overall staff associations. They've been very, very helpful, very, very supportive. Apprehensive, yes, about how they will affect them but, on the whole, very supportive. So, I would say that the spirit has been good but there are some resistances and that's normal in big organizations with deeply-entrenched habits and — but the changes that have resulted from the Secretary-General's reform programme, I think, go beyond anything that's ever happened to this Organization in its 52 odd years. But it's far from finished and the Secretary-General intends to continue with his new Deputy, Louise Frechette, who will be taking on this ongoing responsibilities. He intends to provide his personal oversight from his own office of this process, to ensure this does not lag – that people don't go back to their old habits – that he continues to drive the process from his own office.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is Ms. Frechette likely to come up with another package?

STRONG: Well, I don't think – I mean, I don't want to predict what she will do. I suspect, however, that it's not another whole new package, but there will be a series of initiatives. The Secretary-General has already made that clear. There will be ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Fine-tuning?

STRONG: Well, fine-tuning but even some new important initials. But not a whole new package right away. I think the package, you know, that there will not be another

comprehensive package within the next year or so, but there will be some very important new initiatives. I mean, for example, in our reform report, we recognized the need to make -- to have a whole new look at the way the environment issue is structured and managed and the role of UNEP....

LITTLEJOHNS: And, of course, an expert on that having been the head of the environment programme.

STRONG: Well, who's an expert you know, but ...

LITTLEJOHNS: I think you ....

STRONG: .... but he deliberately left that until the new leadership could be in place and now we're launching a major initiative there, and there will be others. I mean, there's a whole question of the information technology ...

BASSIR POUR: I just gonna talk about disarmament, actually. It was one of the actions that has indeed been implemented already. I understand it was supposed to deal with arms trafficking. Now what is it exactly this Department is supposed to do here in New York?

STRONG: Well, the – what was really designed to do is to elevate the whole disarmament issue to a higher level, give it more priority. Now that's not just arms trafficking, that's an important issue, but there's some very fundamental changes in the whole disarmament field. I am not an expert on disarmament, but as governments disarm around the world, civilians are arming. Much of the disarmament of armies is actually going to arm civilian population. So there's a real need to actually eliminate arms not just to take them out of the hands of the military and let them flow into the hands of ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Don't say that to the National Rifle Association in the United States.

STRONG: Well ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Or maybe in Canada you have a similar problem.

STRONG: We have, but not quite to the degree of – I say it to whom it may concern, and it will concern the National Rifle Association.

BASSIR POUR: And it would be – this Department would be doing what then, exactly, to stop the flow of ...?

STRONG: Well, it has several functions. Of course, it has an important ongoing function in supporting the international negotiating process designed to continue to reduce the nuclear capability and to control that. Now, some of that is done outside of the United Nations, of course, but the UN has been constantly supportive of that process and needs to strengthen that. Then there's the question of the arms trade and trying both to reduce it and to control it. And, of course, that goes beyond than just arms – that also goes to the whole question of development. How much money is being spent.

MENON: On this matter, the particular aspect of the reform process which has mystified people within the UN, as much as people outside it, relates to public information, there was a report recently which said that a hundred percent of the information budget of the UN was non-programme. This has created an enormous amount of question within the Organization. Can you shed any light on it?

STRONG: Well, there's a semantic definitional argument about what's programme and what isn't programme. I don't think that's very interesting to a public audience. The real question is, how effective is it? This is one of the areas where the UN spends a great deal of money. And we all know that the UN's image is not what it should be. Now that can't all be blamed just on those who convey the information. But it does mean that we've got to look at new and innovative ways of getting the message across. Letting people understand what the UN means to them. What it would mean if we didn't have a UN. What does it mean if we have a better UN.

BASSIR POUR: Are we doing this? Is this message going across?

STRONG: Not sufficiently, yet.

LITTLEJOHNS: **World Chronicle** is trying to do its bit. I'm afraid that we're out of time, Mr. Strong. In order to be – that's the way it goes. So, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.**

Our guest has been Maurice Strong, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. He was interviewed by Bhaskar Menon of the *International Documents Review* and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**